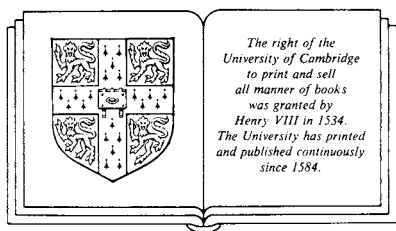


# A QUESTION OF SYLLABLES

ESSAYS IN  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH VERSE

*CLIVE SCOTT*



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# I

## THEME AND SYLLABIC POSITION

### LAMARTINE'S *MÉDITATIONS POÉTIQUES*

Most thematic treatments of Lamartine's verse<sup>1</sup> have found beneath the intricate tissue of commonplace and allusion a real enough existential drama. But while thematic treatments uncover for us the concealed organisation of a poetic mentality, pick out those lexical items which have a peculiar loadedness in a poet's work and explore their relationships, they do not usually concern themselves with the more intimate lives of these items, the variations of emotional colouring, modality and projection which they undergo within a poetic corpus, thanks to their changing location in verse-structure. In this chapter, I would like to isolate a set of lexical items from a given Lamartinian corpus by undertaking my own brief thematic analysis, an analysis indebted to those works listed in the first note to this chapter, and select from this set of lexical items a small body of words upon which to practise a more thorough, prosodic analysis. From this analysis, which will concentrate on the syllabic position of words in the line, on their syllabic proportions, on the measures and combinations of measure they create, I wish to try and construct the range of activity of these words, the diversity of their moods, the tones that inform them. At the same time I wish to discover, through the study of these words, something more about the energies and the conditioning capacities inherent in the line of verse, and in particular, in the alexandrine. My corpus is the twenty-four poems<sup>2</sup> which constituted the first edition of the *Méditations poétiques*, published in March 1820. Although several of these poems are entirely in octosyllables or have octosyllabic passages or lines, my prosodic analysis will address itself to the alexandrines; the octosyllables will receive some attention in the second chapter.

What is the nature of Lamartine's existential struggle? It is primarily, I suppose, a struggle with time, with time's passage. It is easy to assimilate this to the great poetic commonplaces of man's mortality, the fleetingness of beauty, happiness and so on. But this

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is to mask something unique about Lamartine. Lamartine is subject to time's cruelty *in the very fabric of his verse*: he experiences the passage of time directly, in the fluency of his own utterance, which carries him unrelentingly through and away from his experiences and memories. And this hand-to-hand struggle with time comes into its sharpest focus as a clash between 'encore' – the still there – and 'déjà' – the already gone:

Au sommet de ces monts couronnés de bois sombres,  
Le crépuscule encor jette un dernier rayon;  
Et le char vaporeux de la reine des ombres  
Monte et blanchit déjà les bords de l'horizon. ('L'Isolement')

Lamartine's poetry is an attempt to prolong this slightest of moments between the still there and the already gone. But the suavity of his writing is his own worst enemy. And it would perhaps not be too fanciful to see the short last line of the stanza used, for example, in 'La Gloire' or 'Le Lac' as a form of exquisite self-torture:

Eternité, néant, passé, sombres abîmes,  
Que faites-vous des jours que vous engloutissez?  
Parlez: nous rendrez-vous ces extases sublimes  
Que vous nous ravissez? ('Le Lac')

The abrupt finality of this last line is like time accelerated or abbreviated, like an exasperated reaching for an end that spells irrevocability. Ultimately the poet gives up trying to postpone the awful moment when all will be gone and, suicidally almost, accedes to time's consummation.<sup>3</sup>

Another factor which makes Lamartine's world peculiarly elusive, slipping through the poet's fingers, dissolving, is the lack of resistance in his landscapes. If we look at the opening of 'L'Isolement', we find the characteristic situation:

Souvent sur la montagne, à l'ombre du vieux chêne,  
Au coucher du soleil, tristement je m'assieds;  
Je promène au hasard mes regards sur la plaine,  
Dont le tableau changeant se déroule à mes pieds.

Not only is the world itself in a state of constant change, but the poet looks at it in a gliding, glancing, drifting way. The passive randomness of his gaze echoes the passivity of his stance, seated as he is beneath a tree. 'Le Soir' opens in a similar fashion:

Le soir ramène le silence.  
Assis sur ces rochers déserts,

*Lamartine's Méditations poétiques*

Je suis dans le vague des airs  
Le char de la nuit qui s'avance.

The objects in Lamartine's world are not obstacles, do not detain the eye. They are, rather, transparent, or dissolved and rendered uniform by surrounding atmospheres, mists, twilight.

The instant, the precious moment between 'encore' and 'déjà' cannot, it seems, be arrested. But it is certainly not for want of trying. The poet's chief resources in this desperate attempt are rhetorical. By means of apostrophe, invocation, rhetorical question, he seeks to distract the elements of his environment from their single-minded preoccupation with moving on or moving away; he tries to engage them in his predicament, to create pauses in process, to find respite in the very request for answers, reasons, probabilities. These rhetorical devices usually have the ironic effect of further isolating the poet, leaving him to supply answers he has no access to, making his *recueillement* a *recueillement* of time-wasting speculation. But the poet frequently resorts to much more direct and unashamed methods, to the kind of plea that we find in 'Le Vallon':

Prêtez-moi seulement, vallons de mon enfance,  
Un asile d'un jour pour attendre la mort.

What is noticeable about the plea is its eminent reasonableness; he wants the respite of only a day, where 'jour' is not to be understood strictly as twenty-four hours, but as a very limited period of time nonetheless. This is perhaps no more than a ploy to intensify the pathos of the situation and helps, of course, to emphasise time's intransigence. But the poet always makes apparently modest pleas like this – we have only to remind ourselves of the final line of the first stanza of 'Le Lac': 'Jeter l'ancre un seul jour'. 'Just one more moment, please' and after that 'Just one more moment, please'; Lamartine is the poet of patient prevarication.

But it is also true that no moment has any value for Lamartine unless it is, precisely, the last moment. The last moment is, of course, always the richest, because it is only when things threaten to leave us that we know how to treasure them, and this treasuring is imbued with the poignancy of its inevitably being too late. The last moment is the moment of the availability of all memories and the moment when the pressures of aspiration beyond the moment and beyond time are at their greatest. In 'L'Homme', the poet looks back to Elvire's passing away – and the notion of passage is certainly more suitable than that of death:

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Je voulais retenir l'âme qui s'évapore,  
Dans son dernier regard je la cherchais encore!  
Ce soupir, ô mon Dieu! dans ton sein s'exhala;  
Hors du monde avec lui mon espoir s'envola!

In true Lamartinian style, he has each day begged 'Soleil! encore un jour!', but to no avail. Elvire passes away, the last moment is lost and the world is of no more interest to the poet. Lamartine is a connoisseur in both the anticipation and enjoyment of last rites.

Some moments really are the final ones. But Lamartine also takes pleasure in savouring last moments which do not have the seal of finality, because they are part of the natural cycle, as in 'L'Automne':

J'aime à revoir encor, pour la dernière fois,  
Ce soleil pâissant, dont la faible lumière  
Perce à peine à mes pieds l'obscurité des bois!

This is an enjoyment of the peculiar piquancy of last moments under false pretences, a vicarious last-moment experience. Lamartine cannot escape the paradoxical truth that things only really begin to exist when they are on the point of ceasing to exist; he has to push things to the very brink of their extinction before he can enter into a rich sensory relationship with them.

Lamartine clings to the light, but it fades from him; he tries to encompass the landscape, but his eye slips over it in such a way that the horizon seems to recede from him, to draw him away, annihilating objects as it goes; he follows without resistance towards a world that has a monotonous neutrality. This is a dismal picture, but one which has its brighter side. Built into Lamartine's understanding that he cannot arrest the world around him, cannot prevent the loved one and a topography slipping away from him, is a concomitant and conflicting understanding that this very process of effacement is the means by which access may be gained to the higher world. Lamartine is a transcendentalist; his desire is to rise above his surroundings, not to lose himself in them, however consoling nature manages to be for him.

With the instant gone, the last moment irrevocably taken from him, Lamartine must seek to preserve its vestige, its trace, its memory. How is he to do this? Simply by *recueillement*, by an ingathering of his intellectual and emotional impulses, by a quiet collection of his spiritual longing, by a special intimacy. As he puts it in 'Le Vallon':

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Mon cœur est en repos, mon âme est en silence!  
Le bruit lointain du monde expire en arrivant,  
Comme un son éloigné qu'affaiblit la distance,  
A l'oreille incertaine apporté par le vent.

D'ici je vois la vie, à travers un nuage,  
S'évanouir pour moi dans l'ombre du passé;  
L'amour seul est resté: comme une grande image  
Survit seule au réveil dans un songe effacé.

The lure of surrounding space inviting the poet to try and make sense of himself in relation to its diversity, is shown to be, precisely, a *lure*, a dangerous seduction. The erasure of reality is not now seen as a loss, but as a necessary process of spiritualisation and dis-embodiment. Lamartine has forsaken the commanding view which led to such inner distress in 'L'Isolement', and taken up his position in a valley, a locality that denies external space in favour of the development of an inner space, a place of refuge, a womb at the heart of the created world which promises a new kind of birth (compare with the valley of 'Adieu' and the subterranean chapel of 'La Semaine Sainte'). Liberated from the interference of sense-data, Lamartine can concentrate all his being on forcing a passage into the super-terrestrial realm.

Hitherto Lamartine has used language to do battle against the flowing, elusive world only to find that language itself is fluid, runs away, confirms that which it sets out to gainsay. He has used language to try to revive the past, to voice his sense of abandonment, only to find that language is not strong enough to resurrect, is only a self-indulgent release of frustrations. But in the valley, in his new realisation of redemption, isolation is beneficent and language is no longer necessary. As the twilight creeps on, as sounds die down and sights become obscured, with the elimination of all distraction, Lamartine can cast off the exasperations that language encourages, and communicate in a soundless spiritual fashion, in prayerfulness, in fact. This is how he puts it in the last stanza of 'Le Vallon':

Dieu, pour le concevoir, a fait l'intelligence:  
Sous la nature enfin découvre son auteur!  
Une voix à l'esprit parle dans son silence,  
Qui n'a pas entendu cette voix dans son cœur?

and in 'La Prière':

Tout se tait: mon cœur seul parle dans ce silence.  
La voix de l'univers, c'est mon intelligence.

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Prayer is wordless communication with God. God was in Elvire, as Elvire is in God. In God are the poet's past, present and future, and in communicating with God the poet communicates with his own totality, he discovers his identity and essential continuity (see also 'Dieu').

How does this state of communication with the transcendental world manifest itself? It manifests itself in the 'rayon', the shaft of light which breaks through the clouds and acts as a corridor of release. Addressing the deceased Elvire in 'Le Soir', the poet describes the visitation of an Elvire-bearing light:

Tout à coup, détaché des cieux,  
Un rayon de l'astre nocturne,  
Glissant sur mon front taciturne,  
Vient mollement toucher mes yeux.

Doux reflet d'un globe de flamme,  
Charmant rayon, que me veux-tu?  
Viens-tu dans mon sein abattu  
Porter la lumière à mon âme?

It is perhaps worth noticing the gentle sensuality of this contact, expressed in 'mollement'; we shall have cause to return to this. It is worth noticing, too, not only that the poet is again absolutely silent – 'sur mon front taciturne' – but also that 'glisser' here has a positive charge: it does not describe that quicksilver quality of time, that awful, because imperceptible, leaking away of life into an anonymous void, which we find expressed at the beginning of 'Souvenir':

En vain le jour succède au jour,  
Ils glissent sans laisser de trace

On the contrary, it is like a gesture of blessing, a soothing therapeutic caress of light, the holier, the more healing, for its being slight and insubstantial. This connection between the verb 'glisser' and the 'rayon' is to be found again in the penultimate stanza of 'Le Vallon':

Avec le doux rayon de l'astre du mystère  
Glisse à travers les bois dans l'ombre du vallon.

As we have intimated, the movement through the 'rayon' is not exclusively a downward movement; the 'rayon' is something like a pneumatic chute for the poet, along which his yearning soul can thrust itself ('s'élancer', 's'élever', 's'envoler' are the characteristic

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verbs of this movement). The dawn, the rising sun offer the poet explicitly upward-thrusting rays:

Que ne puis-je, porté sur le char de l'aurore,  
Vague objet de mes vœux, m'élancer jusqu'à toi!  
(*'L'Isolement'*)

The word 'rayon' suggests a single, bright, focussed ray of light, cutting like a knife through the intervening space and alighting like a spotlight on the souls of the elect. One only has to change the noun 'rayon' to the verb 'rayonner' to multiply the rays and provide a more diffused kind of light: we find in *'Souvenir'* for instance:

Tes yeux, où s'éteignait la vie,  
Rayonnent d'immortalité!

The verbs which most typically describe this diffused light are 'inonder' and 'répandre'. The former appears, for example, in *'L'Immortalité'*, a poem once again addressed to Elvire:

Tu viens d'un jour plus pur inonder ma paupière  
and the latter in *'La Prière'*:

Pour moi, c'est ton regard qui, du divin séjour,  
S'entr'ouvre sur le monde et lui répand le jour

In both cases the verb is not accompanied by 'rayon' at all, but by the generalised 'jour'. But it would be wrong to dissociate this more widespread light from the sharp light of 'rayon', for two reasons. First, because Lamartine does, in some images, attempt to reconcile the two, to use the 'rayon' idea to give light a direction, an urgency, an intensity, and to combine this with the process of diffusion, to convey the universal beneficence of an Elvire who has become something more than the poet's personal possession; thus the 'rayon' is endowed with a gentleness, a power of tender encompassment which generates a feeling of the warm solicitude of the divine, rather than of its authoritarian summariness. The unambiguous ray of light must somehow be allowed to invest the whole of existence. One of the examples of this effort towards combination concerns not a visual perception of light, but a visual perception which shades into an aural one; it is the image of the church in the fourth stanza of *'L'Isolement'*:

Cependant, s'élançant de la flèche gothique  
Un son religieux se répand dans les airs

Here the spire stands in, as it were, for the upward ray of light, but the sharp thrust of the building disperses in a vague haze of sound;

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the verticality of the spire is countered by the horizontality of the spreading religious note. In fact, there is a sense in which the image is quite literally a contradiction: how can 's'élancer' really be applied to a sound as diffuse as this? The image we are left with is as of a fountain, the jet of water breaking at its zenith and scattering in a fine mist of drops.

And this leads to our second reason for not dissociating diffused light from the concentrated light of the ray. What we find in the example from 'L'Isolement' is the association of two different sense-impressions, one visual, one aural, one specific, one generalised. The invasion of the poet's being by a vague, self-insinuating but balm-giving force involves other senses too, smell and touch, because Lamartine uses perfumes and light winds to fulfil the same function as diffused light. Here again are sensations which, at one and the same time, have a high degree of insubstantiality and a certain voluptuous charge. We find perfume and breeze fused in a single complex in a stanza added to 'Souvenir' in the second edition:

Et si le souffle du zéphyre  
M'enivre du parfum des fleurs,  
Dans ses plus suaves odeurs  
C'est ton souffle que je respire.

Here is a much more pantheistic picture of Elvire's benign influence, coming from the immediate environment, which does much to restore the intimate and terrestrial side of the relationship, so necessary to the efficacy of the transcendental projection of it. And it does seem that the energy of Lamartine's spiritual longing depends on the impetus of a sensual experience, however masked this may be. We learn next to nothing about Elvire's physical appearance, it is true – apart from Ossianic commonplaces like her 'tresses d'ébène' – but the poetry exudes a kind of light-headed and pleasurable intoxication, conveyed in great part, perhaps, by the caressing melodiousness of the verse itself. Fine spiritual ecstasies often turn out to have solid physical sources, and Lamartine's are no exception; one of the stanzas excised from 'Le Lac' makes this abundantly clear:

Nous ne pûmes parler: nos âmes affaiblies  
Succombaient sous le poids de leur félicité;  
Nos cœurs battaient ensemble, et nos bouches unies  
Disaient: Eternité.

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The final word of this stanza, 'Eternité' looks like a last-ditch justification for, and rendering respectable of, an embrace so pleasurable as to need no moral support.

At all events, the benign light wind, the 'zéphyr', as opposed to the harsher 'aquilon', is like an exhalation, carrying the last breath, the perfume, of the dying beauty, rose or woman. The wind is also that part of the natural scene that can exist without the landscape, that profits by Lamartinian evanescence. Lamartine is no stranger to synaesthetic experience; we may have suspected this in the church spire example, we see it at the end of 'L'Automne', where while the flower expires in perfume, the poet expires in sound, the swan-song of his own verse. But more pertinently to our purpose, we might quote lines from 'La Prière':

Sur les rayons du soir, sur les ailes du vent,  
Elle s'élève à Dieu comme un parfum vivant.

The 'elle' referred to here is the voice of the universe, the poet's 'intelligence'. Again we feel not only the will to fuse together different types of sensory perception, to create a spirituality which is connected with a total sentience, a total availability to the bodiless communications of a higher principle both beyond and within the natural world; we feel also the will to reconcile the 'rayon', now in a more amenable plural form, with more dispersive agents of communication.

There is one final form of contact between the terrestrial and transcendental worlds, which I would briefly mention, and that is reflection. This world reflects the other world. This is again an extremely vague and diffuse kind of contact, but unlike breeze and perfume it is utterly passive: it simply exists or does not exist, depending on symbolic atmospheric conditions. The advantage of the reflection system is obvious: reflections can multiply themselves, create a chorus of reflections, create a form of involvement, out of their very passivity, an involvement in which all contributors are put on an equal footing and thus more meaningfully conjoined; as Lamartine puts it in 'La Prière':

L'univers tout entier réfléchit ton image,  
Et mon âme à son tour réfléchit l'univers.

where 'tu' is God.

The idea of reflection naturally suggests images of water, because it is the stretches of water which are the real mirrors of nature. Of course Lamartine's primary concern is whether the water is clear

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and smooth-surfaced or not, whether it is a good reflector or not, and this question naturally attaches to the concomitant emotional or temperamental condition of the poet. In 'Le Vallon', for instance, the poet has come in search of inner peace, to reconcile himself to his life of disappointment, to set his love in its right, celestial perspective. In the opening description of the valley, his eye alights on two streams:

Là, deux ruisseaux cachés sous des ponts de verdure,  
Tracent en serpentant les contours du vallon;  
Ils mêlent un moment leur onde et leur murmure,  
Et non loin de leur source ils se perdent sans nom.

These lines would seem to allude to the poet's relationship with Elvire, its hiddenness, its gentle sensuality ('serpentant'), the moment of fulfilment and the subsequent return to oblivion. In the following stanza, the poet makes these streams explicitly significant to his own situation, but in another direction:

Mais leur onde est limpide, et mon âme troublée  
N'aura pas réfléchi les clartés d'un beau jour.

The poet presents his doubts about his ultimate redemption as a fear that his soul, rendered turgid, no doubt by his hesitation and diffidence, will never have the ability to reflect the divine light. This contrast of limpidity or turgidity is to be found again, and perhaps more interestingly, in the second stanza of 'L'Isolement':

Ici gronde le fleuve aux vagues écumantes,  
Il serpente, et s'enfonce en un lointain obscur;  
Là, le lac immobile étend ses eaux dormantes  
Où l'étoile du soir se lève dans l'azur.

Here the contrast is what one would expect: the flowing river is a destiny that cannot be guessed at, the troubled water of passing time, while the lake is the still, but not stagnant, surface, the achieved spiritual plateau and site of regeneration by reflection. Here, dramatically juxtaposed, are the two worlds of which we have been speaking all along, but we can begin to see how the one is a necessary condition or complement of the other. The lake is a kind of abstraction of the river, the river, like the disappearing landscape, a necessary preamble to spiritual quietude and self-realisation. Strangely perhaps the serpentine movement is here connected with the troubled water rather than the limpid. But we should recognise the essential ambiguity of much of Lamartine's

lexicon, or rather his own ambiguity and temperamental changeability. 'Serpenter' may in one context indicate elusiveness, even deviousness, in another sensuality or integration, depending upon what principle of the poet's existence it is applied to.

One of the other factors to which these last quotations draw attention is the acoustic property of water. This is perhaps the more necessary, since many Lamartinian events take place in the fading light when water surfaces are difficult to make out. 'Le Lac' is remarkable for its absence of visual impressions. The concord of the lovers is answered by the regular, rhythmic striking of the oars, and the sweet tones of Elvire's voice are answered by the echoes of the spell-bound shore. Echoes like these might be considered as the acoustic equivalent of reflections (see also 'Le Golfe de Baya').

These quotations point up the connection between the water and the light. The still water not only reflects the diffused brightness of the day, but also, by implication, the sharper, focussed image of the moon. The water is also connected with light in a verb we have already encountered in a line from 'L'Immortalité', namely 'inonder'. But most important of all, by way of rounding off this brief thematic exploration, the ray of light itself, the nocturnal ray, is equally a reflection, as a stanza from 'Le Soir', already quoted, affirms: the rays of the moon are reflections of the sun:

Doux reflet d'un globe de flamme,  
Charmant rayon, que me veux-tu?  
Viens-tu dans mon sein abattu  
Porter la lumière à mon âme?

This thematic outline is certainly far from comprehensive. There is much, particularly relating to Lamartine's mystical experiences and to the processes of memory, which is lacking. There are large tracts of Lamartine's lexicon which are overlooked – one might, for example, with equal profit study the lives of 'déserts', 'concerts', 'séjour', 'regard'; and the words/themes which have been selected are by no means treated exhaustively. But we have sufficient evidence to make some general observations about Lamartine's lexicon, and sufficient material for a prosodic project.

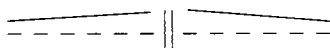
Lamartine may have taken over a diction all but exhausted by the eighteenth century; his poetry may have acquired the reputation of being almost exclusively intertextual, with its sources in the Bible, Milton, Ossian, Rousseau, Parny, Gray and Chateaubriand among others. But in many instances, Lamartine may be as much quoting himself as drawing on others, and besides, read as we have read it,

his verse gives no hint of its genealogy: refreshed by its immersion in an existential condition, his vocabulary acts as a gravitational centre for a multiplicity of private impulses; this vocabulary is as limited as it is apparently conventional, but its limitedness has the same kind of virtues as the limited vocabulary of Racine's theatre: that is to say an unflagging pertinence and an ability to encompass and highlight the changing and contradictory impulses of the speaker – hence the multiple value of so many of the words. Although critics may point to the heterogeneity of these twenty-four *Méditations*,<sup>4</sup> both in tone and form, they are all essentially about the same thing, but with so much variation in mood, emphasis and formal context, that there is no repetition, only an engrossing exploration.

Lamartine's landscapes do not belong to a specific time and specific place; they are accumulated landscapes, the products of superimposed images of the same thing ('Souvent sur la montagne . . .'), of superimposed images of different places, of superimposed literary topographies, all sifted through the colorations of interiority;<sup>5</sup> literarisation is indeed a cause or symptom of the general dematerialising tendency in Lamartine's work. All this produces a certain destabilisation of language. In Lamartine's poetry two worlds – a world of contingent existence, an uninhabited, purely natural, unregenerate world on the one hand, and, on the other, a world informed and visited by divinity, a world which may equally encompass the natural world – are served by the same vocabulary; as a result, the same word in different contexts may oscillate between opposing poles of value. Moreover, any word may flicker uncertainly between the literal and the figurative, for if God may inhabit anything at any time, then any object may at any time cease to be object and become a particular manifestation of His power, or solicitude, or mere presence. The evanescence of the landscape, encoding the passage of time, is a direct challenge to persistence and memory, a constant urge towards oblivion, a threat to all relationship, all sense of identity and purpose. At the same time, that same evanescence may be an exciting prelude to the fruitful hiatus between evening and morning, when the individual enters a purely spiritual space and establishes contact with a higher order of being; in these circumstances, evanescence becomes itself a form of concentration of the self in the self. Correspondingly, as we have seen, a verb like 'glisser' can belong to either world and derive from each a different emotional charge. Similarly, 's'en-voler', which in relation to the spiritual world expresses release

from mortality and flight to the stars, can, when used of the contingent world, just as well express a centrifugal movement of dispersal. 'Aurore' can refer either to the dawn that comes too soon and disturbs the quiet rapture of the poet communing with the night sky or indeed with the living Elvire ('Le Lac'), or, alternatively, to a mystic dawn, a dawn of birth to eternal life, a dawn of reunion with the deceased Elvire ('Souvenir', 'Le Soir'). It is with this sense of the mobility of Lamartine's language in mind, that we should approach the operations of his lexicon in verse-structure.

As a preface to observations about the way certain words operate in the Lamartinian line, I would like to reflect briefly on the general shape of the alexandrine, the line with which we shall be concerned, and more especially on the 'accent circonflexe' of its intonational outline:



The voice reaches a pitch-peak at the caesura and then gently descends as it moves towards the line-ending. This rough intonational shape is a function of the syntactical and rhythmic autonomy of the individual line, an autonomy which is, I hasten to add, relative; if accent in French is terminal and coincides with the terminus of a grammatical or syntactical group, then the accent at the end of the line will signal the closure of such a group, where that closure will be *more or less* syntactically significant.

This circumflex shape is, of course, by no means invariably present. It can be disturbed by end-of-line interrogation (—||—/), by end-of-line enjambement ( / || \ ), by enjambement at the caesura (—||—\ ), by fragmented syntax within the line (e.g. / / || / \ ) or by the demands made by words themselves, as their meanings resist the circumflex's attempt to impose itself:

Et prenant vers le jour || un *lumineux* essor  
(‘L’Homme’) ( / || / \ ) (italics mine)

But it is sufficiently characteristic to provide a useful working base, particularly in Lamartine's verse, where the dominant tone is usually elegiac and where the forward flow is usually uninterruptedly smooth. Circumflexity suggests of itself certain movements of the spirit and emotions: the first hemistich is a movement of impulsion, aspiration, energy which subsides in the second hemistich; thus enthusiasm may be followed by discouragement, aspiration by a sense of futility, momentary happiness by a return to

### *Theme and syllabic position*

resignation or despondency. Equally, the growing pressure of an anger or an exasperation may yield to consolation or a restored equanimity. The possibilities are too manifold to enumerate. But it should be made clear that the circumflex may just as easily describe a *physical* movement:

Une clarté d'en haut || dans mon sein descendit  
(‘L’Homme’)

though again we should qualify this assertion by remarking that movements of spirit may outweigh physical movements, or, in other words, that a downward physical movement may well signify an upward spiritual one:

Un rayon descendra || dans l’ombre de ton âme?  
(‘L’Homme’)

(Here the interrogative construction also helps to sustain the pitch-level, supplying a new peak at the line-end.) We might also suggest that the circumflex shape is peculiarly adapted to a process we have already singled out from the *Méditations*, that of a focussed upward thrust (‘s’élancer’, ‘s’élever’) which resolves itself into a horizontal and falling movement of diffusion and dispersal (‘se répandre’, ‘inonder’):

Cependant, s’élançant || de la flèche gothique,  
Un son religieux || se répand dans les airs (‘L’Isolement’)

This particular configuration may be more generally expressed as a single-mindedness, a purposefulness, which broadcasts itself in a soothing, subdued emanation. But, in relation to Lamartine’s verse, does this mean that ‘s’élancer’ and ‘s’élever’ will always appear in the first hemistich while ‘se répandre’ and ‘inonder’ occupy the second? This we will shortly discover. At all events, our quotations give some indication of how manifold the shape and significance of pitch outlines may be and how complex their determinants.

Although the circumflex pattern is not ubiquitous, it is a pattern of real pertinence to the Lamartinian alexandrine, e.g.:

Lui seul est mon flambeau dans cette nuit profonde (‘Dieu’)

Peut-être de ce feu tu n’es qu’une étincelle (‘La Foi’)

Regarde! je viens seul m’asseoir sur cette pierre (‘Le Lac’)

Ici viennent mourir les derniers bruits du monde  
(‘La Semaine Sainte’)

and, even when not applicable, it does provide a structural norm against which to measure variations. I wish to concentrate my attention, to begin with, on some of the verbs that have figured in the thematic analysis and in the preceding discussion, namely 's'élancer', 's'élever', on the one hand, and 'se répandre' and 'inonder' on the other. In considering the way in which verbs operate in the verse line, we must bear in mind (a) what part of the verb they are, (b) their syllabic position, and (c) factors, syntactic and rhythmic, which may have played a part in determining that position, where (a) may also be a position-determining factor.

In the lines already quoted from 'L'Isolement' (see back, p. 14), the present participle of 's'élancer' finds itself at the caesura. This is perhaps the classic position for any non-adjectival present participle, whose durative nature is reinforced by its suspension at a major verse-juncture; in this example, the duration is further extended by the pre-echoes of the nasal vowels (*ā*) of 's'élançant' in 'cependant', and it is noticeable how the transition from upward thrust to diffusion is facilitated by this same vowel, 's'élançant' → 'se répand'. In fact we might argue that the upward thrust of 's'élancer' is inversely proportional to its duration, that in its participial form its thrust flattens out or does not reach the heights it might achieve in other forms. This surmise is endorsed, I think, by the only instance in the corpus of the present participial form of 's'élever', which obligingly occurs in the same position, at the caesura:

Tandis que, s'élevant de distance en distance,  
Un faible bruit de vie interrompt ce silence      ('La Foi')

Once again, the present participle draws support and prolongation from the frequency of the nasal *ā* in its immediate linguistic environment ('tandis', 'distance' (twice), 'silence') and at the same time the phrase 'un faible bruit' indicates that the upward movement is of a very subdued and limited kind. The logical implication of these findings seems to me to be realised in lines from 'L'Immortalité':

La lampe, répandant sa pieuse lumière,  
D'un jour plus recueilli remplit le sanctuaire.

Yet again, the participle has acoustic kinships with words around it – the nasal *ā* is to be found in 'lampe', 'remplit', 'sanctuaire' – but the repeated sound is not only an instrument of prolongation, it is also an enactment of the light's pervasiveness, enveloping objects